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Tito Vespasiano Strozzi's "Ad psyttacum": A Renaissance Latin Poet Parrots the Past

Jan Ziolkowski

In the first part of *Henry IV* Shakespeare has Hotspur declare: "He said he would not ransom Mortimer, / Forbade my tongue to speak of Mortimer, / But I will find him when he lies asleep, / And in his ear I'll hollow 'Mortimer!'/ Nay, / I'll have a starling shall be taught to speak / Nothing but 'Mortimer,' and give it him / To keep his anger still in motion."[1] Shakespeare's choice of talking bird in this passage has had far-reaching ecological consequences. The common starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) came into the New World in 1890–1891 when American Shakespeare enthusiasts, who wished to introduce all the birds mentioned by the Bard of Avon, brought about one hundred starlings across the Atlantic and released them in Central Park.[2] Although at first the starlings were as out of place in Central Park as nightingales would be in Harvard Yard,[3] eventually they took to their new habitatat, and, in part thanks to this importation, starlings now constitute one of the most numerous species of birds in the world.[4]

The fate of Shakespeare's bird poses in a particularly memorable fashion the problem of *imitatio* which has to be central in the discussion of Tito Vespasiano Strozzi's poetry, as well as of so many

This paper is adapted from a talk delivered in the Houghton Library on 6 February 1986.

[1] *Henry IV* 1.3.219–226.

[2] See F. M. Chapman, "The European Starling as an American Citizen," *Natural History*, 25 (1925), 480–485; C. J. Feare, *The Starling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 62; and B. Kessel, "Distribution and migration of the European starling in North America," *Condor*, 55 (1953), 47–67.

[3] For a poem that reveals an amusing unawareness of Harvard's bird life, see Yevgeny Yevtushenko, "The American Nightingale," in *The Poetry of Yevgeny Yevtushenko*, trans. George Reavey (New York: October House Inc., 1965), pp. 116–119.

[4] See Feare, *The Starling* (note 1), p. 62, and "Starling," in *A Dictionary of Birds*, ed. Bruce Campbell and Elizabeth Lacy (Vermillion, S.D.: Buteo, 1985), p. 562.

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other Neo-Latin poems.[5] In this essay I will deal with Strozzi's *Ad psyttacum*, a poem about a talking bird in which *imitatio* of past poetry plays a central role. Let us look first at the author and the context in which he wrote (Ferrara) and then at the parrot poem and the literary background against which it was written (classical Latin parrot poems).

I

Strozzi began composing poetry around the middle of the fifteenth century, at a time when Italy boasted such exceptionally gifted Neo-Latin poets as Poliziano, Marullo, Sannazzaro, and Pontano. Most of the finest Neo-Latin poets in quattrocento Italy congregated in Florence (for example, Poliziano) or Naples (Sannazzaro and Pontano), or else they shuttled between the two cities (Marullo). Among the smaller centers of poetic and artistic activity, Ferrara must be ranked high. Today the city is known to most outsiders through Giorgio Bassani's *Il Romanzo di Ferrara*, which comprises *Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini* and five other novels set in Ferrara.[6] In the past the reputation of Ferrara rested quite rightly upon its Renaissance past. Goethe's *Torquato Tasso: Ein Schauspiel*, Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," Giosuè Carducci's "Alla Città di Ferrara" — all of these works celebrate, not eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Ferrara, but rather Renaissance Ferrara.[7]

The cultural prosperity of fifteenth-century Ferrara resulted largely from the rise of the Este family. For our purposes Duke Niccolò III of Ferrara need be remembered only on account of the children he fathered in abundance, both inside and outside wedlock. His reproductive activities earned him immortality in an amusing proverb: "Di quà, di là, sul Pò, / Tutti figli di Niccolò."[8] More relevant to the career of Strozzi are the three dukes of Ferrara whom Niccolò sired — Leonello (who ruled from 1441 to 1450), Borso (1450–1471), and Ercole I d'Este (1471–1505). These three dukes improved the

[5] On *imitatio* in Renaissance Latin poetry, see Fred J. Nichols, ed. and trans., *An Anthology of Neo-Latin Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 19-25.

[6] Giorgio Bassani, *Il Romanzo di Ferrara* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1980).

[7] This list of literature in which Ferrara is prominent comes from Werner L. Gundersheimer, *Ferrara: The Style of a Renaissance Despotism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 13, n. 1.

[8] See *Ibid.*, p. 76.

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educational system in Ferrara, which led to higher standards of Latinity as well as to substantially greater numbers of students attending the university;[9] they also built up an impressive library of Latin classics;[10] and, finally, they encouraged the composition of Latin poetry in the city by gathering latinists around them and by patronizing them. Leonello in particular had a heartening faith in the value of Latin; it is reported that, when asked about those who write in the spoken language, Leonello termed them "illiterate idiots" and demanded with a fervor all the more striking for its illogic, "Which of the classical authors ever composed a work in the vernacular?"[11]

As a result of the Este patronage, by 1450 Ferrara had become one of the most important centers for linguistic and philological studies in all of Europe.[12] Simultaneously, it experienced a flowering of love poetry that began in the middle of the fifteenth century and culminated in the first years of the sixteenth. The foremost Latin poets of Ferrara were Tito Vespasiano Strozzi, his son Ercole Strozzi, Ludovico Pittori, Antonio Cammelli da Pistoia (often referred to simply as Pistoia), Boiardo, and Ariosto (the two last-mentioned poets wrote in Latin long before they turned to Italian);[13] and other names could be added easily, especially if one included such temporary residents as Pietro Bembo.[14] Bartolomeo Paganelli Prignano, a Latin poet of

[9] See Carlo Pinghini, "La popolazione studentesca dell'Università di Ferrara dalle origini ai nostri tempi," *Metron: Rivista internazionale di statistica*, 7 (1927), 120–144, esp. 140–143, and Gundersheimer, *Ferrara* (note 7), pp. 101–103.

[10] See Giulio Bertoni, *La Biblioteca estense e la coltura ferrarese ai tempi del Duca Ercole I (1471–1505)* (Turin: Ermanno Loescher, 1903).

[11] Angelo Decembrio, *Politiae Literariae Angeli Decembrii Mediolanensis Oratoris Clarissimi, ad Summum Pontificem Pium II libri septem* (Augsburg: H. Steynerus, 1540), f. 10; translation in Gundersheimer, *Ferrara* (note 7), p. 114, n. 38.

[12] See Gundersheimer, *Ferrara* (note 7), p. 126.

[13] On the Latin poets of Ferrara, see Giulio Bertoni, *La Biblioteca estense* (note 10), pp. 133–176; id., *L'"Orlando furioso" e la Rinascenza a Ferrara* (Modena: Cav. Umberto Orlandini, 1919), p. 10; id., *Guarino da Verona fra letterati e cortigiani a Ferrara, 1429–1460*, Biblioteca dell'Archivum romanicum, series 1, Storia, letteratura, paleografia, 1 (Geneva: L. S. Olschki, 1921), *passim* (especially chapters 2-3); Giovanni Getto, "La corte estense luogo d'incontro di una civiltà letteraria," in *Letteratura e critica nel tempo*, 2d rev. ed. (Milan: Marzorati, 1968), p. 331; and Paul Van Tieghem, *La Littérature latine de la Renaissance: Etude d'histoire littéraire européenne* (Paris: E. Droz, 1944), p. 69.

[14] On Bembo in Ferrara, see Bertoni, *L'"Orlando furioso"* (note 13), pp. 183–184, and Giosuè Carducci, "La Gioventù di Ludovico Ariosto e la poesia latina in Ferrara," pp. 115–374 (here: pp. 336-338), in *Edizione nazionale delle opere*, Vol. 13, *La Coltura estense e la gioventù dell'Ariosto* (Bologna: Nicola Zanichelli, 1936).

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Modena, summed up the qualities of Ferrara in vivid if not entirely complimentary words: ". . . tot Ferraria vates, / Quot ranas tellus Ferrariensis habet."[15]

The real father of Neo-Latin poetry in Ferrara was not a native of the town, but rather a man from Verona named Guarino (1374–1460). After a life of wandering, Guarino settled in Ferrara at the end of 1429 as tutor to Leonello; he remained there until his death at the age of eighty-five in 1460.[16] Although not many more than two dozen of Guarino's poems have survived, they suffice to give an impression of his personality.[17] Particularly graceful are the poem he wrote in 1427 to thank the painter Pisano (often known as Pisanello) for the gift of a painting of St. Jerome and the one he wrote in 1432 to decline an invitation from the people of Verona for him to return to his birthplace.[18] Yet, as is the case with many outstanding teachers, Guarino's real legacy was not his poetic compositions, but his students.[19] Both by lecturing on poetry at the university of Ferrara and by participating in the reorganization of the high school, Guarino spent his very active old age in training pupils and students in Latin.[20]

Tito Vespasiano Strozzi (who is sometimes referred to as Titus Vespasianus Stroza or Strozius) was five when Guarino, already fifty-five years old, arrived in town. Tito, like his older brothers Niccolò and Roberto, was educated in Ferrara under Guarino; at first Guarino lodged in the Strozzi home, later in a house he first rented and then bought from the Boiardi.[21] Guarino's establishment must have been

[15] Bartolomeo Paganelli Prignano (died 1493), proemium to the second book of his elegies, folio 17^{v} (Modena: Impressam Mutinae per me Dominicum Rochuciolum, anno salutis 1489 die 7 octobris).

[16] For a biographical sketch of Guarino's life, see Remigio Sabbadini, *Vita di Guarino Veronese* (Genoa: Tipografia del R. Istituto Sordo-muti, 1891).

[17] For a list of twenty-eight poems definitely by Guarino, see Sabbadini, *La Scuola e gli studi di Guarino Guarini Veronese* (Catania: Tip. Francesco Galati, 1896; rpt. with the title *Guariniana*, Turin: Bottega d'Erasmo, 1964), pp. 231-233.

[18] For the poem to Pisanello, see Guarino Veronese, *Epistolario*, ed. Remigio Sabbadini, Deputazione Veneta di Storia Patria: Miscellanea di Storia, vols. 8, 11, and 14 (Venice: Societas, 1915–1919; rpt. Turin: Bottega d'Erasmo, 1969), I, 554-557 (no. 386), and III, 209–210; for the one to Verona, see *ibid.*, II, 135–137.

[19] Carducci, *Edizione nazionale delle opere* (note 14), XIII, 158, writes of Guarino: "l'opera sua più bella, più gentile, più geniale fu il marchese Leonello."

[20] On Strozzi, see Bertoni, *Guarino da Verona* (note 13), pp. 132–133.

[21] Guarino, *Epistolario* (note 18), III, 298.

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a lively place. It not only attracted the cream of Ferrara's youth; it also skimmed some of the best and brightest from other cities (for instance, the poets Basinio Basini of Parma and Rafaele Zovenzoni of Trieste).[22] Future Latin poets even came to Ferrara from other countries. For example, Janus Pannonius (or John of Csezicze, 1434–1472), the finest of fifteenth-century Latin poets born in Hungary, was trained as a youth in Ferrara. The poetry of Janus, Strozzi, and other pupils contains fond descriptions of Guarino's teaching.[23]

Like Guarino, Tito Vespasiano Strozzi lived a long life: he was born in May 1424, and he died at the age of eighty on 30 August 1505.[24] But with the length of their lives the similarities end, because Strozzi was not satisfied with a *vita contemplativa* as Guarino had been; instead, Strozzi spent most of his time administering his own properties and serving the Este family. In working on behalf of Dukes Borso and Ercole, Strozzi was called upon to carry out many delicate missions. In 1497 he was rewarded for his efforts by being promoted to the highest civil office: *giudice dei dodici Savi* ("judge of the twelve sages"). This advancement made the last years of Strozzi's life unpleasant, because as *giudice* Strozzi was forced to levy extremely heavy and unpopular taxes. Tito Vespasiano Strozzi died in office in Ferrara on 30 August 1505; in 1508 his son, Ercole, was murdered, probably to settle a grudge against Tito for his conduct in office.[25]

In spite of his fast-paced public and business life, the elder Strozzi managed to steal time in which to compose Latin poetry. His chief accomplishment was the six books of elegies published under the title of *Eroticon*. The first two volumes of these elegies, written under the inspiration of Tibullus, appeared in 1443; Strozzi continued to polish these early poems as well as to add new ones until the very end of his life. In addition, he produced four books of *Aeolosticha*, a collection of Horatian *Sermones*, and the *Borsias*, an incomplete epic celebrating

[22] On Basinio during his days in Ferrara, see Carducci, *Edizione nazionale delle opere* (note 14), XIII, 169-173.

[23] See Janus Pannonius, *Iani Pannonii ad Guarinum veronensem panegyricus* (Venetiis: apud Gualterum Scottum, 1552), and Tito Vespasiano Strozzi, *Eroticon* 4.23.43–54.

[24] For a detailed analysis of the facts about Strozzi's birth, see Giulio Reichenbach, "Date di nascita di umanisti," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*, 57 (1911), 325-329.

[25] See Giosuè Carducci, *Delle poesie latine edite e inedite di Ludovico Ariosto* (Bologna, 1876), pp. 189–195.

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the glories of Duke Borso d'Este.[26] Most of these poems were gathered together with the poems of the younger Strozzi and published posthumously in 1514 by Aldus Manutius (1449–1515) at the famous Aldine press in Venice.[27]

II

The eleventh poem in book six of Strozzi's *Eroticon* is entitled *Ad psyttacum*. The poem is addressed to a parrot that had been the pet of Strozzi's lover, the woman he calls Phylliroe.[28] As Strozzi writes in the poem, Phylliroe has died, the victim of a plague that struck Ferrara in 1463;[29] but her pet bird persists in calling out her name. Although at first Strozzi begs the bird to cease its litany of Phylliroe and not to renew his grief, as the poem draws to a close he entreats the bird to continue, in the hope that the bird's devoted repetition of the name Phylliroe will help heal his grief and love-longing.

Strozzi's parrot poem reveals strong resemblances to a few classical Latin poems. As a dirge that centers upon a lover's pet bird, the *Ad psyttacum* is meant to bring to mind a series of poems by Catullus, Ovid, and Statius. Catullus was, as far as is known, the first Latin poet to write a dirge for a dead animal.[30] His lament for Lesbia's *passer* (*Carmen* 3) earned for the bird the same literary immortality that its mistress, Lesbia, has attained. No poems of Catullus were better known in antiquity than *Carmen* 2, about the *passer* when it was

[26] For editions, see Anita Della Guardia, ed., *Tito Vespasiano Strozzi: Poesie latine tratte dall'Aldina e confrontata coi Codici* (Modena: Blondi e Parmiaggiani, 1916), and Walther Ludwig, ed., *Die Borsias des Tito Strozzi. Ein lateinisches Epos der Renaissance*, Humanistische Bibliothek: Abhandlungen, Texte, Skripten: Reihe 2, Band 5 (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1977).

[27] The recto of the last leaf (152) bears the colophon: "Venetiis in aedibus Aldi et Andreae Asulani soceri 1513." Yet because the Venetians began their year on the first of March rather than the first of January, the book was actually published in 1514 by our reckoning. See Reinhard Albrecht, *Tito Vespasiano Strozza: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Humanismus in Ferrara* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1891), p. 4, n. 2.

[28] The name Phylliroe was a favorite among the Latin poets of Ferrara, to judge by its appearance in two poems *Ad Philiroen* by Ariosto: see Ludovico Ariosto, *Opere minori*, ed. Cesare Segre, La letteratura italiana: Storia e testi, 20 (Milan and Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1954), pp. 6–9.

[29] Phylliroe is assumed to have died on 24 April 1463, in the course of a plague that afflicted Ferrara: Albrecht, *Tito Vespasiano Strozza* (note 27) p. 16.

[30] Gerhard Herrlinger's *Totenklage um Tiere in der antiken Dichtung*, Tübinger Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft, 8 (Stuttgart, 1930), is the standard work on classical laments, epicedia, and epitaphs for animals.

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alive, and *Carmen* 3 — Martial alone refers directly to them on a half dozen occasions; and no poems of Catullus have had more imitators in modern literatures.[31]

Although in the parrot poem Strozzi avoided any overt references to the *passer* poems, the Renaissance poet may have made a subtle nod or two to Catullus. Like Catullus, Strozzi emphasizes the intimacy that obtained between the bird and his mistress. Catullus's bird spent its time in the lap of Lesbia, chirping for her alone; Strozzi's would first hop from its cage onto Phylliroe's hand and then would move up so that it might exchange gentle kisses with her. Since the parrot outlives Phylliroe, Strozzi cannot describe the effect of its death on its mistress as Catullus does; and Strozzi cannot follow the lead of Catullus by taking the bird to task for causing his mistress to weep. Instead, in a picture of shared grief that contrasts pointedly with *Carmen* 3, Strozzi's parrot sees the poet weeping and responds rather improbably by shedding tears of its own.

After Catullus, Latin verse laments for dead animals remained in vogue, but they tended to stylize sincerity or to exaggerate parody as the ante-Augustan poet had avoided doing.[32] In one group, Martial and Ausonius reduce grief to an epigrammatic platitude.[33] Moving in the opposite direction, Ovid made parody the hallmark of his lament and epitaph for Corinna's parrot.[34] Ovid's engagingly jocular poem found a ready imitator in Statius, who consoled Atedius Melior upon the death of his parrot by writing a learned threnody in hexameters.[35]

The parrot poems of Ovid and Statius inspired a host of imitators in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and subsequent centuries. In French come first the *Epîtres de l'Amant Vert*; these two poems were written in 1505 by Jean Lemaire de Belges (ca. 1473–to before 1525) to soothe Margaret of Austria after her favorite pet, a parrot, had the misfortune to be devoured by a dog.[36] Lemaire refers explicitly to the poems of

[31] I paraphrase C. J. Fordyce in *Catullus: A Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 87.

[32] See Herrlinger, *Totenklage* (note 30), pp. 81–91.

[33] *Ibid.*, pp. 100–104 (Martial, 4.32 and 11.69); pp. 104–105 (Ausonius, *Carm. 33)*; and "Anhang" numbers 47-53 (authentic epitaphs).

[34] See Ovid, *Amores* 2.6, ed. E. J. Kenney (Oxford, 1961).

[35] See Statius, *Silvae* 2.4, ed. John S. Phillimore (Oxford, 1918).

[36] Although there have been more recent editions and translations, the standard critical edition remains Jean Lemaire de Belges, *Les Epîtres de l'Amant Vert*, ed. Jean Frappier (Lille and Geneva: Giard and Droz, 1948).

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Ovid and Statius.[37] Much later, but equally charming is the poem *Ver-Vert* (1734) by Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset (1709–1777); in this poem a parrot named Ver-vert who has won the hearts of the nuns in a convent in Nevers falls from grace after he picks up shocking language while traveling to a convent in Nantes.[38] Most prominent in English is "Speke Parott," a satiric poem written against Cardinal Wolsey towards the end of 1521 by John Skelton; Skelton's knowledge of Ovid's poem is certain, of Statius's likely.[39]

Strozzi seems to draw upon Ovid and Statius for his choice of bird and for a few touches of description; in particular he seems indebted to Statius for his comment that talking birds were once able to greet Roman emperors in human words.[40] But for the tone of the *Ad psyttacum* Strozzi leaves behind classical poetry to strike out on his own.

In one of the major studies of Neo-Latin poetry Strozzi has been termed "l'un des meilleurs poètes d'amour néo-latins"; but in the same passage he has been reproached for "l'abus des souvenirs classiques."[41] Because the *Ad psyttacum* recalls poems by Ovid and Statius, Strozzi's poem might appear to be an open-and-shut case of such abuse; and yet upon closer examination the poem reveals many signs of artistic originality.

In writing the *Ad psyttacum* Strozzi completely altered the basis of the classical bird laments. Unlike Catullus, Ovid, and Statius, he presents a parrot which is alive and well, whereas the woman who once owned it is dead. He hints at the paradox of the parrot who outlives the parroted — the paradox that found a poignant expression in reality when Humboldt, during his explorations in South America,

[37] On Lemaire's application of his classical models, see Hermann Gmelin, "Das Prinzip der Imitatio in den romanischen Literaturen der Renaissance," *Romanische Forschungen*, 46B (1932), 83–360 (here: 268–273).

[38] For a convenient summary in English of the poem, see Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries c. 1275 to 1535* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1964), pp. 593–595.

[39] For an edition, see *John Skelton: The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Scattergood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), no. 18, pp. 230–246; on the date, see p. 453.

[40] Pliny, *Naturalis historia* 10.59 (118 and 120), is the *locus classicus* for the practice of training parrots to greet emperors. Among the poets, see Persius, *Prologus (Choliambi)* 8; Statius, *Silvae* 2.4.29–30; and Martial, *Epigrams* 14.73.

[41] Van Tieghem, *La Littérature latine de la Renaissance* (note 13), p. 63.

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found an aged parrot which was the one surviving speaker of an Indian language.[42]

In the process of developing the paradox of the talking parrot, Strozzi takes a glance at the typically Renaissance uncertainty about the rationality of birds and animals: in one verse the bird seems to be foolishly unaware that Phylliroe has died (line 4), although in other instances it is credited with great powers of perception and reason (lines 9 and 31).[43]

But Strozzi is not concerned primarily with examining the pros and cons of theriophily; rather, he is intent on therapy for his own grief. For Strozzi, the parrot's ability to utter the name of his dead beloved is at first a bitter reminder of loss, as he brings home in the opening line with a conspicuous allusion to Catullus's *Carmen* 68 (lines 92-93), a lament on the death of his brother. At the end the parrot's speech achieves the opposite effect: it brings solace. In a mythological reference that alludes to Ovid's *Remedia amoris* (lines 47-48), Strozzi draws a parallel between the parrot and the spear of Achilles, which both wounded and healed Telephus, the son of Hercules.

By choosing to open and close his poem with reminders of Catullus's *Carmen* 68 and Ovid's *Remedia amoris* rather than *Carmen* 3 and *Amores* 2.6, by opting to cast his sorrow in the form of a poem about a living parrot and a dead lover, Strozzi proved himself a rival rather than an imitator in our sense of the word. Strozzi may have parroted the past, but he did not merely ape it.

The following edition of *"Ad psyttacum"* differs only in punctuation and capitalization from those of Della Guardia, ed., *Tito Vespasiano Strozzi. Poesie latine* (Modena, 1916), pp. 178–179, and Francesco Arnaldi, Lucia Gualdo Rosa, and Liliana Monti Sabia, editors and translators, *Poeti latini del quattrocento*, La letteratura italiana: Storia e testi 15 (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1964), pp. 292–295. For the English translation I take full responsibility, although I thank Richard Tarrant for several astute suggestions when the article was already in proof.

[42] The language in question had been spoken by the Atures: see Alexander von Humboldt, *Relation historique du Voyage aux Régions équinoxales du Nouveau continent* (Paris, 1814–1825; rpt., ed. Hanno Beck, 3 vols., Stuttgart: Brockhaus-Antiquarium, 1970), II, 598–599.

[43] Renaissance thinking on the rationality of birds and animals is discussed *passim* in George Boas, *The Happy Beast in French Thought of the Seventeenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1933), and Leonora D. Rosenfield, *From Beast-Machine to Man-Machine: Animal Soul in French Letters from Descartes to La Mettrie*, 2d ed. (New York: Octagon Books, 1968).

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Tito Vespasiano Strozzi
(Titus Vespasianus Stroza or Strozius, 1424–1505)

Ad psyttacum

Psyttace, quid frustra, misero mihi nuper ademptam,
  Phylliroen tanta sedulitate vocas?
Parce, precor, parce insanos augere dolores!
  Heu, periit quam tu vivere forte putas.
Parce, meo toties animam de pectore vellis,
  Phylliroen quoties blandula lingua refert.
Heu, periit, neque eam spes amplius ulla videndi,
  quam propter nobis vivere dulce fuit.
Si sensus tibi, si ratio est, ut habere videris,
  communi tristem te decet esse malo.
Non sum equidem oblitus, tibi quae responsa vocanti
  poscentique dapes saepius illa daret.
Et memini, aurato dum te prodire iuberet
  carcere, porrectam te insiluisse manum
atque illinc dulcem, rostro parcente, salivam
  suxisse illaesis molliter e labiis.
Post, ubi divinae laudaras sidera frontis,
  "Non homo," dicebas, "sed dea Phylliroe est."
Prisca salutato si paucis Caesare verbis
  nigranteis aetas nobilitavit aveis,
quid tibi facunda fingenti plurima voce,
  tam bene, tam docte, psyttace, laudis erit?
Laudo equidem, ingenium miror. Debere fatemur
  nos tibi nulla tuis gloria par meritis.
Sed ratio et tempus fortunaque lubrica certam
  dant nostris legem rebus et eripiunt.
Haec igitur nos causa monet desistere coepto
  nonnunquam et placitum flectere propositum.
Quid loquor? Unde meae tanta inconstantia mentis?
  Quod modo damnaram, psyttace, nunc cupio.
Forte meis aliqua ratus es te posse mederi
  luctibus, hos ubi sum dictus adisse lares.
Quodque ita sit, cum me tristi moerore silentem
  vidisti et multo rore madere genas,
tu quoque, commotus graviter sociusque doloris,
  ecce piis lacrymis lumina moesta rigas.
Functus es officio veri et prudentis amici
  nilque reliquisti quo mala nostra leves.
Perge, precor, dominaeque tuo communis utrique
  semper adorandum nomen ab ore sonet
atque utinam in saevo pietas tua vulnere fiat
  tam dulci eloquio Pelias hasta mihi.

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To the Parrot of his Dead Mistress

O parrot, why do you call with such great zeal — but with no
success — for Phylliroe, whose recent death left me wretched?
Refrain, I entreat you, refrain from increasing my mad grief! Alas,
the woman whom you perhaps think is alive has died.
Refrain, for you tear my heart from my breast whenever your caressing
tongue repeats the name of Phylliroe.
Alas, she has died, and there is no more hope of seeing her,
on whose account life was sweet to me.
If you have feeling and reason, as you seem to have,
you ought to be sad because of our shared misfortune.
I have not forgotten the replies she gave to you so often
when you called and demanded a tidbit,
and I recall that when she bade you to emerge from your gilded prison,
you leapt upon her extended hand,
and that then, with your beak doing no damage, you sucked sweet
saliva gently from her unharmed lips.
Afterward, when you had praised the starlike eyes that shone upon her divine
countenance, you would say, "Phylliroe is not a human being, but a
goddess." If ancient times celebrated black birds for greeting
Caesar in a few words,
what manner of praise will there be for you, O parrot, who with
eloquent voice contrive many words so well and so skillfully?
To be sure, I praise you and I marvel at your ingenuity. I admit that
I stand in your debt: no glory can be equal to your merits.
But reason, time, and quick-changing fortune grant to our affairs a
fixed law — and snatch it away.
Sometimes this motive prompts me to abandon an undertaking and to
change a set intention.
What am I saying? What causes my mind to be so inconstant?
That which a moment ago I condemned, O parrot, now I desire.
Perhaps you thought in some way that you could alleviate
my bereavement, when you learned that I had entered this home.
And so when you saw that I was silent in glum sorrow and
that my cheeks were bedewed with tears,
lo! you too were greatly moved and a companion of my grief,
and moistened your sad eyes with devoted tears.
You fulfilled the office of a true and wise friend,
and you omitted no means by which you might relieve my woes.
Continue, I entreat you, and may the worshiped name of a mistress
shared by you and me resound forever from your mouth;
and would that your devotion in repeating so sweet a name should
become like the spear of Achilles in my cruel wound.

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